

Riem-Schmidt-Deppen Farm (Reifsynder Farm)
SW corner of State Route 183 and Church Road
Mount Pleasant vicinity
Penn Township
Berks County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-264

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. PA-264

RIEM-SCHMIDT-DEPPEN FARM
(Reifsnnyder Farm)

Location: Southwest corner of intersection of State Route 183 and Church Road (LR06048), approximately .5 mile northwest of Mount Pleasant, Penn Township, Berks County, Pennsylvania.

USGS Bernville Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: house 18.408910.4473290
barn 18.408830.4473330

Present Owner: Pennsylvania State Game Commission.

Present Use: Demolished in 1971.

Significance: The house of this Pennsylvania German farm was built in 1791, while the barn was a nineteenth-century bank barn. The farm was owned by at least three generations of Catholics. The Schmidts and the Deppens were virtually the only Catholic families in the area, and the house was used for services as early as 1793. The two Dr. Deppens, moreover, tended to the medical needs of the Irish Catholic workers constructing and maintaining the Union Canal (which operated from 1828 to 1884). The Deppen private cemetery is on the property and contains the graves of Irish Catholic workers who succumbed to "canal fever."

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1791. The stone house had date stones in both gables. The bank barn was probably built circa 1850, and rebuilt after a fire in about 1880.
2. Architect: As in the case of nearly all Pennsylvania German family farmsteads, neither the house nor the barn were designed by an architect in the formal sense. Both buildings were obviously planned and executed by a master builder or mason. The planning and interior woodwork of the house were among the most sophisticated in the area.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the buildings are located. Chain of title information for Berks County is vague and often incomplete, so this data is based on educated guesses using the best available information. Reference is to the Office of Recorder of Deeds, Berks County, except where noted.

- 1764 Deed dated May 23, 1765 recorded
in County of Philadelphia
John Penn, Proprietor of the Province of Pennsylvania
to
George Riem
- 1793 Deed dated May 6, 1793 recorded August 19, 1793
in Book 13 page 345
George Riem
to
Philip Schmidt (Smith)
- 1836 Deed dated April 2, 1836 recorded April 24, 1836
in Book 44 page 46
Herman Arnold, and Elizabeth, his wife, Philip Smith,
and Francis R. Arnold and Mary, his wife, Legatees
of Philip Smith
to
Dr. Daniel Deppen and Catherine, his wife, a daughter
and heir of Philip Smith
- circa 1860 Dr. Daniel Deppen died, leaving the property to
his eldest son, Dr. Darius Deppen; deed unrecorded
- 1904 Deed dated April 4, 1904 recorded April 9, 1904
in Book 308 page 553
C. Lucretia Deppen, Anna I. Deppen, Sara N. Deppen,
and L. Legora Unger and George W., her husband, all
heirs of Dr. Darius Deppen
to
Isaac C. Greth
- 1931 Deed dated October 22, 1931 recorded October 27, 1931
in Book 724 page 679
Isaac C. Greth and Kate A., his wife
to
C. Welby Streaker and Mary R., his wife
- 1960 Deed dated March 23, 1960 recorded March 23, 1960
in Book 1362 page 318
C. Welby Streaker and Mary R., his wife
to
Norman Reifsnyder and Nancy, his wife

4. Alterations and additions: While the exterior of the house remained intact until demolition, the interior was altered through the years. The kitchen was relocated several times and the bathroom twice. In the original plan, the hall on the second floor ran clear to the front wall of the house. In about 1850 the hall was paritioned to create a sewing room, which was replaced by a bathroom in about 1963. This latter alteration necessitated the moving of the doorways on the front bedrooms to the rear of the bedrooms.

The barn was rebuilt in about 1880 after a fire. The first-floor plan of the barn was completely replanned in the mid 1960's when the traditional multiple-entry stall system was replaced by two rows of metal cattle stanchions running the length of the barn. The barn floor was concreted at this point and an automatic barn cleaner installed.

B. Historic Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

"Captain" Philip Schmidt bought the house in 1793 and used it as a headquarters for spreading the Catholic faith in the area. Schmidt was a missionary of sorts, having established a small group of Catholics in Mt. Pleasant. Catholic services were held in the downstairs double parlor, and in the orchards in the warmer months. Schmidt's daughter, Catherine, married Dr. Daniel Deppen, and the property was willed to them in 1836.

Dr. Deppen was also a Catholic, being fondly remembered in the area as the "Katholische Dukter." Dr. Deppen tended to the medical needs of the Irish Catholic workers digging the nearby Union Canal. Many workers suffered from what was known as "canal fever," and several are buried in the Deppen cemetery located on the property. Dr. Daniel Deppen's four sons were also doctors, with Darius inheriting the property in circa 1860. Darius moved to Bernville to practice (his father had practiced in the house), and rented the farm to a series of tenants.

The property left the hands of the Deppens following Dr. Darius Deppen's death in 1904. The Catholic connection was also terminated when the property was sold by the estate to Isaac C. Greth. From then on the property was run as a general farm and then a dairy farm, until purchased and demolished by the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Photographs: Mr. and Mrs. Norman Reifsnyder of Mt. Pleasant, Pa., have in their possession a complete set of photographs and color slides documenting the house and barn from 1960 to 1971.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Norman Reifsnyder, the last private owners of the farm, September 1, 1976.

- b. Secondary and published sources:

Arthur, Eric, and Dudley Whitney. The Barn, A Vanishing Landmark in North America. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1972, esp. pp. 84-113.

Dornbusch, Charles H. and John K. Heyl. Pennsylvania German Barns. Allentown, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, Vol. 21, 1958.

Fink, Leo Gregory. "Smith House and Deppen Cemetery at Mt. Pleasant." Historical Review of Berks County XXXIII (Winter, 1967-68), 12-14+; good discussion of the family history of the house.

Long, Amos, Jr. The Pennsylvania German Family Farm: A Regional Architectural and Folk Cultural Study of an American Agricultural Community. Breinigsville, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Society, Vol. VI. 1972.

Meiser, Goerge, IX. "Historical Survey of Blue Marsh Project Area." Historical Review of Berks County XXXVI (Summer, 1971), 98-110+; general study with good map of the area and the landmarks.

Prepared by Thomas Kheel
Project Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
September, 1976

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This was an excellent example of a very prosperous Pennsylvania German farm. The house, built in 1791, was a five-bay limestone structure, employing classical detailing both inside and out. The interior woodwork was of particularly fine quality. The barn was a late nineteenth-century bank barn, planned and built according to Pennsylvania German traditions.
2. Condition of fabric: Because the buildings were demolished before recording and documentation could take place, the description that follows has been pieced together from photographs and interviews, rather than compiled from direct observation of the building fabric.

B. Description of Exterior of House:

1. Overall dimensions: The two-and-a-half-story house measured approximately 40' across its five-bay front by 30' deep. There was a one-and-a-half-story rear wing which measured approximately 25' by 18'. Attached to the rear of that was a one-story smokehouse, measuring approximately 8' by 10'.
2. Foundations: The foundations were constructed of randomly laid rough, limestone masonry with smooth corner quoins.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: The exterior walls were composed of randomly laid rough, limestone masonry with smooth corner quoins. The front wall was plastered and whitewashed below the level of the porch roof, and whitewashed above the level of the porch roof. The quoins were painted green above the roof of the porch. There was a datestone marked "1791" in the gable of each end wall.
4. Structural system: The exterior limestone walls were 2' thick. Large oak floor joists, measuring about 3" by 10", supported the floors. The interior room partitions were formed by two layers of 1" thick boards nailed together. One layer of boards was nailed vertically, and the other was nailed at a 60 degree angle for stability.

5. Porches: There was a 6' deep front porch running the full length of the house. The porch was supported by ornamental posts forming five bays. The floor was made up of narrow-width tongue and groove boards.

There was a porch on each side of the rear wing. These porches were about 6' deep and ran the full length of the wing.

6. Chimneys: The brick chimneys located in the middle of each end wall were used to vent fireplaces in the two front rooms of the house on the first floor. There was a third brick chimney at the rear of the rear wing which was used to vent a large walk-in bakeoven.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The front door was extraordinarily wide, reputedly to allow for the passage of coffins. The door itself was a very thick oak door with large iron hinges, with a glass transom above. There was also a wooden storm door located just in front of the front door.
- b. Windows and shutters: All of the windows on the first and second floors had six-over-six-light, double hung sash and shutters with the original clasp hardware.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The gable roof over the main block of the house was covered with asbestos roofing which had been placed over tin which had, in turn, been placed over wood shingles (the bottoms of which could be seen in the attic). The pent roofs located about at the level of the second floor on each end wall of the main block were covered with wood shingles. The roof over the rear wing was a gable roof covered with tin painted red placed over wood shingles. The roof over the smokehouse was a gable roof covered with wood shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: There was a simple wood cornice painted white surrounding the roof line on all sides of the house.

C. Description of Interior of House

1. Floor plan

- a. First floor: The central hall, about 8' wide, provided access to the four rooms on the first floor. The two rooms on the southeast side were once joined by a folding wooden door which was removed circa 1910. The east front room may have been the original kitchen since the fireplace showed signs of cooking. Entry to the rear wing (called the summer house) was through doors in either of the rear rooms in the main block. The summer house was basically one large room used for cooking and eating in the warmer months of the year. The smokehouse was entered from the rear by going down a set of stone steps.
- b. Second floor: The second floor was divided into four bedrooms of approximately equal size and a bathroom located at the end of the hall (i.e., in the central bay of the front facade). Each bedroom was entered through a separate doorway from the upstairs hall.
- c. Basement: The basement was entered from a stairway directly below the main stairway to the second floor. Basically one large room with a packed earth floor, it was used for storage and for housing of modern service equipment.

2. Stairways: The stairway connecting the first and second floors was located at the rear of the central hall. It had a landing and a very gentle slope, with the risers measuring only about 4" each.

The stairway connecting the first floor and the cellar was a straight run. The stairway connecting the first floor of the rear wing to the attic was a winding, Schnecke (snail) stairway commonly found in Pennsylvania German houses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

3. Flooring: The flooring on the first and second floors was wide random-width boards. The cellar floor was packed earth.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls were composed of horsehair plaster laid over hickory lath. The walls were painted various light pastel colors. The ceilings were 9' above the floors and were originally open beam; however, they had been finished off with plasterboard in the 1930s.
5. Doorways and doors: All the interior doors were wood panel doors designed to match the woodwork and the built-in cabinetry. The doors were surrounded with thick moldings.
6. Decorative features and trim: The rooms on the first and second floors were trimmed with classically designed woodwork, including window surrounds, mantels, overmantels, stairway balustrades, corner closets, baseboards, chairrails, and door surrounds. There was also wainscoting of nineteenth century origin in several of the rooms. The overmantel (made of curved strips of molding) and adjoining cabinetry in the front north room on the first floor were particularly fine. The two rear bedrooms had simpler molding than the rest of the house and no paneling in the window reveals. The tendency to simplify exterior and interior treatments in the rear of houses is common in Pennsylvania German building.
7. Hardware: The house was fitted with all the original late eighteenth-century hand-forged iron hardware.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Lighting: Most of the rooms were fitted with early versions of modern electrical fixtures, usually mounted in the ceiling in the center of each room.
 - b. Heating: Electrical baseboard central heating was installed about 1965. This system replaced a coal-fired hot air system. The house was originally heated by fireplaces and iron stoves venting into the fireplaces.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faced northeast (towards Route 183) and was sited on a slight embankment. The house was strategically located at the intersection of the main road between Reading and Bernville (about .5 mile west of Mt. Pleasant) and the road to North Heidelberg Church. The house was also only about .2 mile from the Union Canal, the Tulpehocken Creek, and the iron truss county bridge connecting Penn Township to North Heidelberg Township. The barn faced southeast and was located about 300' from the house.

2. Landscape design: As in the case of nearly all Pennsylvania German farmsteads, there was never a professional attempt to design the farm landscape. The farmstead exhibits the typical Pennsylvania German sensitivity to the rolling contour of the land, however, with the buildings arranged in convenient and visually satisfying ways that take full advantage of the complexities of the site. The barn, for example, was sited to allow for multi-story entry and exposure, while the placement of the main house allowed for direct access to the outbuildings, while still maintaining a distinct sense of separateness. The area around the house was well-planted with flowers, shrubs, and several large trees. A late nineteenth century ornamental wire fence separated the yard from the main road. There was a stone retaining wall located about 75' northwest of the house making the transition to the barnyard. Water was obtained from a well just to the southwest of the rear wing.

3. Outbuildings:

- a. Barn: This large (100' by 45') bank barn was a good example of nineteenth-century Pennsylvania German barn planning and construction. The barn was oriented to the southeast which served to protect the space below the projecting forebay (also known as the vorbau, vorschuss, overhang, overshoot, or overshoot) from the prevailing northerly winds in the colder months. The forebay also provided shelter for the two-piece "Dutch" doors leading into the first floor of the barn. The barn had a shed addition attached to the northeast end to house implements. The original part of the barn was six bays long.

The barn was painted red with white trim. There were six Palladian style windows across the front of the barn, composed of a central window with an arched top in the center with two wood louvers on the sides. There were six doors directly below the Palladian windows to allow for access to the second floor from the front. The barn had a gable roof covered with tin placed over wood shingles. Three ventilator cupolas sat on the peak of the roof. The center cupola was larger than the two at each end, but all were of a similar design, employing an arched section of ornamental, Victorian bracketing and dentils supporting a pyramid roof. A small spire rose from the center of the pyramid roof. The barn was constructed of massive, sawn spruce timbers brought to the site by way of the Union Canal. The timbers were joined together by mortise and tenon joints (a traditional structural system known as fachwerkbau).

The plan of the two main floors of the barn was typical of the nineteenth century Pennsylvania German bank barn. The first floor was essentially one large room which was originally carefully subdivided into separate stalls and feed alleys entered by the "Dutch" doors under the forebay. The first floor was radically replanned about 1962 when the multiple entry system was replaced by two rows of metal cattle stanchions running the length of the barn. The front wall of the first was constructed of limestone and concrete block. The interior of the first floor was heavily whitewashed and had a concrete floor with an automatic barn cleaner.

The plan of the second floor of the barn was also typical of the Pennsylvania German bank barn. The three central bays, as entered by three sets of large doors on the uphill side, were originally used as a threshing floor and had partitions between the bays to contain the grain being processed. The bays to the right and the left were storage mows for straw and hay. The first and second floors were joined by three "hay holes" through which hay and straw were dropped for use on the first floor. There was fully two-and-a-half stories of open storage space above the level of the second floor for the piles of hay and straw. There were five built-in ladders dowelled into the columns of the trusses to allow for access to the hay lofts. Granaries were located in both ends of the front of the barn. A steel track arrangement ran the full length of the inside of the barn to provide for movement of hay and straw with a hay hook.

- b. Other outbuildings: This house and barn were part of a typical ensemble of Pennsylvania German farm buildings, including a wagon shed, corn crib, silo, chicken house, butchering shed, privy and all the other buildings traditionally constructed as integral parts of a working farm.

Prepared by Thomas Kheel
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Historic American Buildings Survey
September, 1976

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Tulpehocken Creek Survey was undertaken in 1976 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) in cooperation with the Philadelphia office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the construction of Blue Marsh Lake. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth L. Anderson, Principal Architect, the documentation was prepared on site by project supervisor Perry Benson (University of Pennsylvania); student architects Robert E. Clarke (University of Notre Dame), Gregory Lee Miller (University of Illinois), Robert Moje (University of Virginia), Daniel F. Clancy (University of Pennsylvania), and Steven M. Shapiro (University of Maryland); and HABS project historian Thomas H. Kheel (Cornell University) and HAER project historian Stuart Campbell (University of Delaware). The drawings were completed in the HABS office in 1977 and 1978 by Mr. Clarke and HABS architects Susan M. Dornbusch and Bethanie C. Grashof. The HABS data was edited for transmittal in 1980 by Alison K. Hoagland of the HABS staff.